

Creation of Historical Satire through History and Psyche in a Nigerian Play

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Abstract— This study investigates how Ahmed Yerima, a Nigerian playwright demonstrates a change from the traditional norms and forms of playwriting. He engages in a new idea like interrogating existing history, creating fictional characters from historical heroes through the portrayal of characters' psyches at the expense of historical situations and predicament. Existing literary scholarly engagements on satire have drawn inspiration and source from either Horatian or Juvenalian satire but the playwright under this study exhibits a style that has a departure from the traditional sources of satire. This study therefore, examines Yerima dramaturgy in creating historical satire through history and human psyches in order to show the distinction between reality and illusion and to privilege human mind above the prevailing societal realities. Our primary text or data shall be *Igatibi*, a play with historical affinity with Nigeria's people, it will undergo a critical textual analysis which will be influenced by postcolonialism and psychoanalysis as theoretical framework. The essence of postcolonial is to distinguish reality from bigotry and hypocrisy, while psychoanalysis helps to investigate characters' unconscious motives and behaviours. It is discovered that the bigotry, crudity, hypocrisy and sycophancy that are aspects of Nigerian socio-political atmosphere are exposed. Thus, a new stylistic technique for satire has evolved complementing both Horatian and Juvenalian satires.

Keywords— *Historical play, Satire, Reality, Illusion, Nigerian play.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since this study deals with emergence of a satire from historical play and artistic ingenuity of the playwright, Ahmed Yerima in *Igatibi*, we shall examine what satire is, its nature on one hand, and Yerima's peculiarities in crafting his satire and its effects on Nigerian society and drama on the other hand. Satire is a genre of literature, and sometimes graphic and performing arts, in which vices, follies, abuses and shortcomings are held up to ridicule,

with the intent of directing individuals, corporations, and society itself to improvement (Elliot, 2004:304). Baldick (2001:228) defines satire as "a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn". Homby (2005:1296) sees satire as "a way of criticising a person, an idea or an institution in which you use humour to show their faults or weaknesses". These views or definitions of satire, when synthesised, show that satire has three components which are to expose individual, corporate and societal fault lines; to criticize them and to improve them in order to attain better ideals, values, cultures etc. It is therefore noteworthy that Yerima's historical and satirical interest in the play is to have a better Nigeria and Nigerians, as he (Yerima) opines in an interview with Gbemisola Adeoti in *Voices offstage Nigerian dramatists on drama and politics*, that "events in the contemporary era sometimes point to an astonishing repetition of what had happened a century or more before. The underlying principle here is to emphasise the need to highlight ways of steering the ship of the state in a new and positive direction" (2010:103). So, to Yerima, the fusion of history, drama and satire will produce a force in the quest for a better tomorrow in every facet of Nigerian society.

Functionally, satire has two prominent roles, which can be categorised as social and psychological functions. Socially, it is an effective source to understand a society and as such, it is the oldest form of social study (Rosenberg, 1960:155). As social study has to do with leading figures and values in the society, satire has satisfied the popular need to debunk and ridicule the leading figures in politics, economy, religion and other prominent realms of power and it confronts in general public discourse (Knight, 2004:254). Psychologically, it provides the keenest insights into a group's collective psyche to reveal its deepest values and tastes. Psychologically, satire provides a satiric impulse and its ritualised expressions to carry out the function of resolving social tension. This is achievable by giving expression to the anti-social tendencies, representing a safety valve which re-establishes equilibrium and health in

the collective imaginary, which are jeopardised by the repressive aspects of society (Szabari, 2009:2). Yerima has cauterised and galvanised social and psychological functions of satire as highlighted by Knight, Szabari and Rosenberg above into an effective stimulants that synergise the success of his historical satire in the play under examination.

Though, a concise concept and function of satire have been observed above, it will be complementary to explain the different types of satire to afford this study the opportunity to identify the type on which side the playwright is leaning and the source of his fascination and artistic talents. Satirical drama can be categorised as either Horatian or Juvenalian, though the two are not entirely mutually exclusive. Horatian satire is named after a Roman satirist, Horace (65-8BCE), who playfully criticises some social vices through gentle, mild and light-hearted humour. It directs wit, exaggeration and self-deprecating humour toward what it identifies as folly, rather than evil. Horatian satire's sympathetic tone is common in modern society. The basic element in Horatian satire is humour no matter the gravity or density of it. Juvenalian satire on the other hand, is named after the Roman satirist, Juvenal who lived between late 1st century and early 2nd century. It is more contemptuous and abrasive than the Horatian. Juvenalian satire addresses social ills through scorn, outrage and savage ridicule. This form is often pessimistic, characterised by irony, sarcasm, moral indignation and personal invective, with less emphasis on humour. The glaring distinction between Horatian and Juvenalian is the degree of their hilarity. Horatian is more hilarious while Juvenalian is less. Having seen the basis of satire in drama, it will be scholarly advisable to examine the nature of Yerima's handling of history to make satirical drama, whether it conforms with the basis of satire as exists in both Horatian and Juvenalian satires or there is a departure from them or there is a fusion or mixture of conformity and departure. Yerima (2007) in an interview, justifies his rationale on leaning on old or traditional concepts and ideas, and improvisation of new concepts in both content and form when he notes:

Whether we like it or not, at a particular time, we would begin to ask: How did it work for our forefathers and predecessors in the village and local setting? What can we take away from that and what can we use now? What do we add to make it ours? It will get to that point because quite a lot of things are not working right now (*because of obsolescence*). We tend

to swallow many foreign things (*concepts, ideas etc*) hook, line and sinker ... We need to make some adjustments (*and innovation*) (106) (emphasis mine).

The quote above has proffered the artistic reason for Yerima's astuteness and uniqueness in style and technique in his plays. It has given the audience foreknowledge of what to encounter in both content and form in his plays. Thus, his dramatic dynamism will be examined by bearing in mind that there will be emerging trends in both content and form but the focus will be mainly on forms, which are internal or structural arrangements of plot, characters and characterisation to demonstrate that the texts under study are historical satires. Likewise, the positive influences and effects of Yerima's style and techniques on dramatic literature, audience and Nigerian society will be examined and analysed.

Before textual engagement, it will be expedient to look at what other literary critics say on Yerima's style. Abdullahi (2013:147) comments:

Of particular interest ... is the range of subject matters, cultural backgrounds and aesthetic approaches employed in the over 35 published plays of Ahmed Yerima. From his shifting cultural focus from play to play, mostly on cultures other than his own, one cannot but be interested in taking another look at Ahmed Yerima's multicultural imagination by attempting to unravel what inspired his peculiar creative attitude, the objectives behind the plays and the impacts of such plays on the reading audience or the intended audience.

It seems that Abdullahi has been grossly fascinated with the eclectic imagination and style of Yerima's plays. He also sees Yerima as a dynamic literary scholar and dramatist. Similarly, Adeoti has noted the eclectic magnitude of Yerima's dramaturgy and he reflects thus:

Yerima's plays in terms of literary and theatrical devices are intriguingly eclectic. He derives artistic influences from a variety of dramatic traditions and tendencies from classical Greece to Renaissance tragedy to naturalism; from Irish drama to Brechtian epic theatre; from the theatre of the absurd to the cockroach theatre traditions, etc (Exploratory Study, 2007:51).

Igatibi, the play understudy in this paper is referred to as historical satire, in which the playwright dwells satirically on the impact of the advent of colonialism on Nigeria and Nigerian cultures, the euphoria of independence and subsequent disillusionment of post-independence era. One remarkable thing about the play is the playwright's attempt to bring to the fore the ineptitude and shortcomings of individuals, groups, classes, and the Nigerian society in general to public scrutiny and to solicit improvement. The author achieves this purpose by deviating a bit from the traditional humour or dense invectives of both Horatian and Juvelian satires. He places his satirical instrument on the characters' psyches through the use of dream. He places more premium on the psychological personality of his heroes than the contextual situations in the play. He (Yerima) sees human minds or the mindset of dramatic characters as latent and catalyst responsible for any action, change and impact of the situation or predicament that may arise in the play and, by extension, in reality.

Creation of Historical Satire through Patterns of Dream in *Igatibi*

It is a historical satire that artistically demonstrates and exposes the sympathetic evolution of Islam and Emirate in Ilorin. It exposes the ineptitude and shortcomings of the historical expedition of Afonja dynasty who are descendants of the Alaafin of Oyo in the old Oyo Kingdom. The play, as a satire, bemoans and ridicules the way Afonja descendants neglect their culture, beliefs and rush gregariously over to the new religion, Islam. However, the playwright acquaints his audience with the heroic resistance of Afonja descendants against the incursion and spread of Islam, but he satirically presents the pitiful and unfortunate setback and defeat suffered by them, as the playwright attributes their shortcomings to the neglect of their culture, belief and tradition, as well as their mad and unwarranted rush to Islam, a foreign religion under the leadership of Alimi of Fulani and Sokoto lineage.

The play throws the pain, setback, lack of peace and unprecedented failures and retrogression that befell the descendants of Afonja dynasty in Ilorin into a hilarious expedition with an intention to admonish them to return to their 'roots' – their religion, belief, culture and tradition by denouncing their whoring rush for Islam. The title of the play is symbolic. *Igatibi* is the custodian of the old religion and culture. *Igatibi*, in the play, is the intermediary between the Ilorin people and their ancestors. He represents the gallant warlords of Ilorin who have been once united by their culture and who have witnessed great heroic and comfortable past. But as soon as the culture and tradition

symbolised by *Igatibi* are renounced by his offspring and, by extension, the present generation, the offspring begin to suffer physically and psychologically in their various endeavours. The play epitomises the present Nigerian society that is always at a cross-road.

Structurally, the play employs symbolism in the character of its heroine, Nga, who is the custodian of the old culture and tradition. In the play she acts as the priestess who harbours and worships *Igatibi* – the remnant of ancestral spirit, in spite of the antagonism portrayed by the worshippers and adherents of the new religion, symbolised by Lemomu and Kamal, her son and grandson respectively. She suffers various mendacious insults and dehumanising vitiation from her own seeds but she maintains her romance with the old tradition, though, the entire society has been driven away by the neurotic doctrine in the new religion. Yerima sees the new culture and beliefs in the play as illusion because Lemomu and Kamal are unable to solve their personal and marital predicaments until they embrace the supernatural endowment of Nga. She is able to unravel the calamity looming in her family and by extension, the calamity of the entire society by her singular and heroic leaning on *Igatibi*, the source and saviour of her society.

Yerima, in the author's note, explains what informed the play, *Igatibi*, as "the use of oral history to speak to the new audience, to raise new questions, new awareness and make contemporary sense" (6). What we are concerned with is how the author uses the oral history and not the historical situation. The intention of the playwright is to rejuvenate, regenerate and redefine history. He does this proactively in *Igatibi* through dream motif. Yerima artistically dwells on the psychic context or mindset of his fictional characters to unfold the historical events. Lemomu and Kamal, the son and grandson of Nga flirt around the new religion by ostracising all manners of appearance or dealings with the old religion which Nga upholds. The author presents their unconscious mind as dreams to showcase their inner desires and, by extension, the plot structure of the play. Psychologically, in their sleep, they are being tortured by the force or religion they abhor physically in their wakefulness. They both have nightmares. Lemomu, the son of Nga and the father of Kamal confirms this:

I heard your scream in my sleep. I had a nightmare myself, and woken up really worried, when I heard you scream. I woke Nga up on my way here, she will soon join us. (28)

The aesthetic of this nightmare lies in the fact that it sends fear and anxiety into the minds of Lemomu and his son, Kamal. They are so confused that they turn to their mother,

Nga, who they always insult and condemn as agent of darkness because she does not swallow hook, line and sinker their new religion, Islam. One remarkable irony in the plot structure is that the apostle or Mallam and a seer of the new religion, Isabi, cannot find solution to the psychological imbalance of both Lemomu and Kamal. He (Isabi) asks his followers to embrace their mother because the powers to live freely are deposited in her “but she has the cure ... and answers (16) that, for them to survive the impending doom in their family, they must not abandon their source, religion, traditional belief and values. From the scenario above, the development of the plot structure thickens. The cause of the domestic and marital problem of Kamal, that is, inability to have male children by his first wife, Amina, and the delayed delivery of the second wife, Hamidat, has been identified as the neglect of their past religion and culture. The possible solution is a revisit of the old religion or culture, which the new religion forbids. Yerima artistically portrays this development through the psychological reflection of the characters’ minds. Yerima works in their minds through hallucination and nightmares. Through hallucination, the author ridicules the follies of religious bigotry of Kamal who is attempting to kill his grandmother, Nga, who is endowed with answer or solution to both his psychological and marital problems. Kamal unconsciously and constantly, hears drum beats that send poignant pains to his head and entire body. This is a great disturbance as he becomes mentally unstable and physically inept. Kamal experiences this ordeal:

(In one wild feat he screams holding his head) it has come again. The drums. My head expands! (Save me Nga or I will die die) Nga runs out and runs back in with a small bowl, she touches Kamal’s forehead with oil from the bowl) (31-32).

This very scene is hallucinatory and according to Leo P.W. (2013), hallucination is a perception in the absence of apparent stimulus; which has qualities of real perception. Hallucinations are vivid, substantial, and located in external objective space. They are distinguished from the related phenomena of dreaming because the mind of the hallucinated is in wakefulness but unconscious, like in dreaming. Blom (2010) supports Leo that “a mild form of hallucination is known as a disturbance and can occur in any of the senses like visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile etc. It can occur like seeing movement in peripheral vision, or hearing faint noises and/or voices (459). The hallucination in the play, which Kamal suffers from, is both visual and auditory and this tells the audience or intended audience that Kamal has double or complex psychological

disturbances. Kamal is not sleeping when this hallucinatory scene begins to occur.

The conversation between Kamal, his father Lemomu and Nga reveals the effect of the malicious hallucination on the minds of Kamal and Lemomu and the actual or contextual situations in the play:

KAMAL: ... there was wild drumming in my head and my brain appearing detached from the skull, danced on its own, expanding to the rhythm of the beat. It was painful. And stood in all his glory, whip in hand ... dancing too.

LEMOMU: He?

KAMAL: A masquerade. His costume was heavy and fearsome, in layers of thick black cloth. And with padded feet, he crept into my sleep. *(In a whispers of fear)* His head carries two heavy horns of a bull. The music started slow. Heavy gbedu drums, then bata and one loud ensemble of drums, accompanied with wild gesticulations. As I watched in amazement ... he spat on my face and I became blind. And the hand with which I had picked a stone to throw at him, twisted. See *(raising his twisted hand)*

LEMOMU: I know him too. For four months now he has visited me in my sleep too

Dancing and wanting me to dance too. And when I refused to carry out his bidding, he chased me until I got tired and fell and he beat me. See Mama. Always on the same spot, his whip would land on my back. See the scars of his whip ...

KAMAL: Subhanallahi ... what fluid evil engulfs us so perfectly?

NGA: *(In a whisper)* Igatibi!

The playwright has successfully portrayed his thematic preoccupation and message in the hallucination suggested in the conversation between the protagonists and the heroine.

The pains of severe headache and blindness of Kamal remarked in, “my eyelids are glued together. I cannot open them and see and my right hand is twisted”, (28) are the repercussions of his disobedience and obstinacy in not yielding to the bidding of Igatibi. The message is that the author exposes the religious bigotry and hypocrisy in the society. He interrogates the national neglect of old tradition, culture and values and the mad rush over to foreign culture with the employment of Freudian collective unconsciousness. Unlike Horatian and Juvenalian satires that evoke humour and or incite invectives to satirise the shortcomings in the society, Yerima employs psychoanalysis through dream motif. Rather than the usual comic scenes or laughter in Horatian and Juvenalian satire, Yerima evokes purgation of emotion, catharsis, to ridicule the trend of religious bigotry and fanaticism in the play. The audience is without an option but to pity characters like Kamal and Lemomu who are victims of circumstances that are beyond their control. They thought they are following the right culture or belief, little do they know that they belong to the old values and culture.

The playwright artistically presents their psychological state of minds as the plot structure and as part of history unfolding the realities of the past and present Nigerian society where there is mad rush for foreign culture and values. It is in the midst of these psychological and physical quagmires depicted through the characters of Lemomu and Kamal in the play, that there is a falling action. Nga comes, with the introduction of Igatibi, the possible answers to all the knots in the plot structure, and the possible resolution to the climax of the plot structure, which is suggested by the hallucination in the above conversation.

Igatibi is presented as a mythical or metaphysical character that possesses the ability to model and shape the lives of his followers and the offspring that will never neglect or forget their roots. The presentation of Igatibi artistically suggests two things. Firstly, it suggests remarkably that the ancestors have an indelible link with their offspring and, by extension, that African culture and values are necessary condiments of African survival if Africans want to grow and be relevant globally. Secondly, it shows the futility and stasis in the rush over to foreign culture. The improvement the playwright is seeking, perhaps, may be that until Africans link their present with the past, the needed socio-economic and political sanity will be elusive. It may also be that there should be a fusion of new and old traditions and values so that there will be social, political and economic growth and relevance of Africans on a cosmic scale. The mythical existence of Igatibi in the midst of cultural vampires provides the historical resource the playwright turns

artistically to a satire. The historical source is found or discovered as Nga narrates the genealogy of Igatibi:

Alaafin Maku had become King of Oyo after Aole. And the great Afonja, though Are Ona Kakanfo had broken away from the stranglehold of Oyo. So we lived free, strong, and independent. We were once again the powerful Ilorin people. And one day, Mallam Alimi took over the reins of power from Afonja with an army led by Solagberu, and then everything changed. Even our oriki changed. There, basking under the new protection of Islam, we sang ... But my father, Oluawo Ekun, Olori ebi of our family Arogunmasa found it difficult to do away with the ways of his fathers and embraced Islam totally. He was warned severally, but he refused to stop. They stoned him to death at Oja Oba, in front of the Central Mosque by the Emir's palace while carrying the sacred Masque of Igatibi. That day, they killed only the body in the Masque, and not its soul. As they did, and set his Masque on fire, it disappeared and reappeared at my feet while washing my father's clothes at home. In anger, the Muslims decided to come here and burn down everything that belonged to my father. The whole town went wild, La ilahallah! La ilahallah' they chanted. It was like wild fire. Touching everything considered unclean. I ran to the shrine, carried the box, put the Masque in it, locked it up as my father had taught me. He never had a male child so, I was a male child to him. I ran into the bush with Igatibi on my head (41-42).

It is the psychological and physical disturbances of Kamal and Lemomu, as suggested in their hallucination, that bring about the heroic narration of the existence of great Igatibi in the above quote. This reveals that, in an attempt to solve the psychological and physical family upheavals of Kamal and Lemomu, Igatibi has to play a prominent role. Aesthetically, the hallucination, as the pattern of dream motif, has been used to develop the characters and their roles in the play. The hallucination has brought the integration of the mind of Nga with assurance when she has listened to her children, their description of the symbolic creation in their unconscious minds. She discovers that the images that

appear to her children are all totems of Igatibi. Having realised that Igatibi has shown to his people his ancestral role and existence, she falls into a trance and she eulogically recounts the deeds of Igatibi. She knows now that Igatibi will find a way of solving the problem in the play. For the mythical and supernatural deeds of Igatibi which are evergreen in Nga's mind have given her much conviction about the soothing roles of Igatibi.

Remarkably, Yerima uses the presentation or exposition of Igatibi stylistically to show irony and foreshadow the plot structure. The audience is aware that the new religion is the cause of the conflict in the play but Kamal and Lemomu think it is the new religion that will liberate them from their predicament. Kamal, in his religious blindness, accuses his grandmother of causing marital and personal upheaval in his family and he threatens to kill her. But the audience knows that Nga is the possible solutions to all the familial problems in the plays. The playwright thus presents the adherents of the new culture as confused people and this reveals the state of their minds. The priest of the new religion, Isabi, sees Nga and the old religion as the answers to the conflicts in the play. Kamal and Lemomu never believe the message of Isabi, a Mallam of Islam:

Your blood Haathere. Her wrapper
covers it all. The Queen of the
Sacred gbedu drums of initiates. She has
all the curethe gods adorn
Her with the answers you seek, and touch
her tongue with the blessings
of the word. (14)

Kamal does not believe his priest. It is ironical here that the Mallam or teacher of the new religion embraces and eulogises Nga, the custodian of the old religion while the follower of the Mallam flinches from embracing or appreciating Nga and even plans to kill her. At the end of the play, Isabi's words come to manifestation when the problems are eventually solved through the presence and metaphysical deeds of Igatibi and through the instrumentality of Nga. Thus, the playwright uses irony and foreshadow as the technique through which the plot structure is developed.

As a historical satire, the playwright ridicules religious hypocrisy in the character of Kamal. Kamal accuses his grandmother of possessing strange powers that are responsible for all the bad things happening in the family and he threatens to stone her to death (29). Before he could execute this murderous plan, he has a hallucination where he becomes blind and twisted in the right hand. The person he accuses now becomes the source of his healing. Another significant hypocrisy is that Kamal, who claims to be

righteous or pious, is the architect of the problems in his family. Shortly after the hallucination and the timely intervention of Nga, he doubts the supernatural potency of Igatibi. Nga warns him. She also tells him the cause of disintegration in his house by reminding him of his wicked acts, which Kamal thought nobody knew. The conversation between Kamal and Nga shows the depth of religious hypocrisy, human intrigues and folly.

NGA: You doubt me then? You doubt
the eminence of the spirit of our fathers?

You doubt the beginning of life? So how
can you accept the strange future you
carve for yourself? See how that future
remains empty and unclaimed without the
tale of the past, which places your feet
firmly in the mud sands by the banks of
the two great rivers. Oh children, to deny
your own, is to crown yourselves in the
laurels of emptiness, foolishness, laced
with profound stupidity.. Here! watching
your sinful soul plot against the true
servant while your lips call on Allah's
grace Shiiio!

KAMAL: Then I am finished.

NGA: That's a mild song to sing. A boy who
calls you father ... brought his bride-to-be
for your blessings. You sent him off to
Sokoto to gather more knowledge of the
Quran, and slowly you and, the wrapper
folds of his bride and now she carries
your child. Who should we condemn to
Nar Ustaz?

From the conversation between Kamal and Nga, the hidden fact about the delayed pregnancy of Kamal's new or second wife is unveiled. Kamal who claims to be religiously upright snatches the wife of his religious servant by feigning to increase the religious growth of his servant. Kamal's secret deeds are revealed to Nga supernaturally. While Isabi, the priest of the new religion which Kamal proclaims to be the ideal is kept in darkness about it. This is ironical. It is also ironical that Kamal sees Nga as the cause of the delayed pregnancy whereas he needs to reappraise his past of infidelity and unfaithfulness to the religion he upholds deceitfully. Yerima satirically exposes human intrigues and foolishness in the character of Kamal by artistically engaging his psyche.

II. CONCLUSION

From the fusion of history, collective unconsciousness and dramatic idiosyncrasy of Ahmed Yerima in the play,

Igatibi, a satire has emerged and this type of satire can be coined historical satire. Indeed, the playwright has invented dream patterns such as nightmare and hallucination as techniques or devices to interrogate the existing historical happening of Nigerian people and to ridicule their intrigues, follies and weaknesses. There is a hybridization of three disciplines – history, psychology and literature in this study, these three disciplines gradually become quintessential strategy for the evolution ‘sato-historical’ drama, a subgenre of African dramatic literature.

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